Grant Stevens: Questioning the Return

This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh … must return to you-all in the same succession and sequence.

- Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 341.

You have to hand it to Hollywood. This global centre for cinematic entertainment keeps on pumping out product formulas that help constitute a state of "eternal recurrence". This new pollution possesses the comforting appeal of repetition and encourages the thought that nothing will change and that we can all go back to sleep after we have watched the movie. However, amidst this glut of recurring cliché Brisbane video artist Grant Stevens is excavating things of value, for he uses video technology to manipulate Hollywood conventions and transform them into his own idiosyncratic and vernacular modes.

In his creative reworking of familiar movies such as Top Gun and A Few Good Men, we gain an insight into the mind of an adolescent male who is attracted to the hard glamour and the spectacular action of big budget-Hollywood films. Stevens' output, however, is not that of the passive viewer or victim of the Hollywood image factory's relentless spectacle. Instead, from his obsessive watching and re-watching of these films emerge thoughtful pieces that explore, question and investigate Hollywood's codes and conventions. After consumption comes digestion, and in Stevens' case, it is the overt, as well as the less obvious aspects of the 'dream machine' that come under the microscope.

Like other video artists Ichiro Sueoka (*Requiem for the Avant-Garde*) and Anne MacGuire (*Strain Andromeda The*) whose oeuvres concentrate on reworking familiar films, Stevens's video work consists of edited segments from archetypal macho, action-packed, hero-narrative Hollywood films. In his art, these fragments are subjected to processes of repetition and are re-presented as endless loops. The effect of dislocating a scene, or even just a line of dialogue, from its 'natural' context in a film narrative, generates a feeling of significant narrative rupture for viewers. This is because the film's enunciative ends are stymied while its communicative structure is demystified and revealed as a construction. What's more, Hollywood's conservative, hetero-normative representations of masculinity and femininity are re-contextualised and show that these value systems are *naturalised* by film narratives.

In his recent works Stevens interrogates Hollywood's narrative and temporal infrastructures in ways that reveal their homogenous formats, but he also delights in finding something valuable amongst the dross, which he then focuses on with clinical precision. In the video work "No Sir" (2003) the artist uses an excerpt from the military drama A Few Good Men (Rob Reiner 1992). In this film, Jack Nicholson plays Colonel Nathan Jessep, a tough, ruthless military officer who is outwitted by the puny but intellectually superior lawyer, Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise). In the critical moment of a military trial into the abuse of fellow soldiers, Jessep asks Kaffee what he wants from him. "I want the truth!" Kaffee shouts, and in one of the 1990s most famous cinematic exchanges, Jessep roars in response: "You can't *handle* the truth!"

It may not be a high water mark for cinema art, but this moment has well and truly passed into the vernacular (to which its homage in an episode of The Simpsons testifies). Stevens takes this well-known incident, and subverts it – not by erasing or eliding it, but rather by elongating it, repeating it, until its original context is well and truly supplanted by a new aesthetic experience produced by an intense engagement with repetition. The viewer is confronted with four simultaneous images of the same scene, which after a process of redaction, emerges as a transformed reality where the duplicated images of Nicholson's face repeat the "You can't handle the truth" line over and over again to cacophonous effect. We then begin to notice the tone, timbre and intonation of Nicholson's voice, which can then be transduced into a bar of music, a CD skipping, or a surreal soundbite. Consequently, the didactic intention of the "You can't handle the truth" phrase, so central to the old master/young buck interaction, is irretrievably damaged. The statement is now understood as a humorous and much bandied about cliché. And, indeed, one interprets Stevens' "No Sir" as a study of cliché in relation to cinema's standardised expressions of anger and frustration.

In purely visual terms, Nicholson's face is the source for a study of bizarre formal articulations as it is a frozen cinematic fragment that is endlessly repeated until it becomes an awe-inspiring banality. With Nicholson's quadrupled visages, our familiarity with an emotional flashpoint in a bland Hollywood drama rapidly evolves into a purely aesthetic experience, for the image becomes a fluid form that is simultaneously figural, abstract and sonic - while the 'Jacks' shout at us through a tessellated scrim that looks like clamouring wallpaper. The grotesque aspects of Nicholson's distorted facial expressions also come across as an exercise in gestural expressionism; like a Kabuki performer whose face conveys stylised emotional states. Of course, on another level the movie was meant to convey the brutal reality of American military life, and its broader lesson was to inform its audience that abuses of American moral values would be discovered and

punished, as the "tourist torturers" in Iraq are now apparently finding out to their discomfort.

In another video, "Danger Zone" (2003), Stevens extracts and reconfigures a romantic interlude between Maverick (Tom Cruise) and Charlie (Kelly McGillis) in the late Cold War military action film Top Gun (which was a critical, and very successful part of the US Defence Department's recruiting strategy in the mid 80s). The artist's title refers to the film's key musical leitmotif - "Ride Into the Danger Zone". This song signifies various themes in the film such as the dangerous moments when as all-American good guys they participate in dogfights with the bad Russian pilots. The emotional appeal of the song also refers to the riskiness of love and intimacy, for Top Gun is of course a happy member of the drama/romance genre.

The artist selects a scene in this film where Charlie and Maverick are about to confess their mutual attraction whilst in an elevator. However, the actors never to get to say a word to each other, because Stevens re-edits the footage into a loop that replays the moment just before they speak. We therefore see their heads in a tight two-shot, but are not privy to their intimate dialogue. Yet, and this is crucial, we do hear their intake of breath – in fact, it's the only thing we hear, as the piece cuts between each character drawing breath, making eye contact and then looking away. We know, instinctively, what that intake of breath, in the context of an intimate scene, means, but Stevens turns it into a peculiar communicative exchange that consists of an eternal series of "ahs" and "huhs". After viewing several repetitions, the scene becomes a kind of deranged mime session that employs a scene from a romantic genre and twists it until it turns into a comedy of manners.

Romance genres are all about the fulfilment of narrative expectations: guy gets girl; attractive heterosexual couple have sex; happily ever after. Here, the attractive lead characters who have eyed each other off in the first half of the film are about to finally act on the burgeoning sexual tension. Stevens' work is so interesting because it refuses to gratify that teleology. Instead, the compulsion of the heterosexual couple formation, so central to the film (if only to offset any charges of homoeroticism against 'the boys'), is denied. The couple don't get to kiss, or even reveal their feelings to each other. It's about the "moment before", which, if considered in the light of the artist's emphasis on recurrences, has a certain wistfulness about it: for it's as though Stevens is saying, if only we could go back to that delicious, agonising moment before the first kiss, and all the tension, anxiety and desire that's present in that moment. There's something beautiful there – and the lesson may well be that in all this mind-numbing flow of Hollywood's narrative conventions we seem to be missing out on the *jouissance* of the unpredictable, of the "almost there, but not quite". Here, Stevens

presents it to us as an eternal possibility, and it's delightful. With a final flourish, he also delivers a lovely layer of irony when you realise that the key song that accompanies the romantic moments between Charlie and Maverick in Top Gun is "Take My Breath Away".

Another work that upsets Hollywood's temporal and narrative conventions and allows Stevens to undertake another dérive into aesthetic effects is "Baby Please Don't Go" (2004). In this video he excerpts Martin Sheen's performance as Captain Willard in Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now. In the selected scene, Willard, in his underwear, and under the influence of certain chemicals, is swaying, dancing and stumbling around his hotel room while at times also looking at himself in a mirror. Moments after this, he suffers a nervous breakdown and smashes the mirror in a furious frenzy. Stevens' seamless editing captures the moment seconds before the mirror smashing and freak-out episode. The result is that Willard's dance is held in a kind of suspended animation, yet the action is tantalising moved a few seconds onwards before recoiling back to the starting point of the dance. This dance is then segued with a soundtrack, but it is not the Doors' bleak rendition of "The End", which would be more in keeping with the stoned-out dance of a US soldier in Vietnam. Rather, Stevens inserts Led Zeppelin's twee love song from the mid-1970s, "D'yer Mak'er". This track, in combination with the artist's re-edited dance sequence, makes Sheen look like a prancing, dancing queen, rather than a malaria-infested subject undergoing severe existential trauma. The first impulse is to laugh, but the artist quickly moves us beyond the risible, for the repetitious images encourage certain inspections and reflections on what would otherwise be considered insignificant minutiae.

In "Baby Please Don't Go", Stevens' manipulation of narrative convention and its connections to temporal linearity (as central to comprehension) powerfully reminds us that cinema is utterly dependent on time. As the time he creates whirls around in its endless journey, Stevens restructures the nature of spectatorship. Accordingly, one's attention moves away from reading the narrative to new areas of focus, such as the glow of the lighting, the texture of the drapes, or the exact shade of Sheen's army supplied khaki briefs. In confounding narrative expectations, readjusting focal points, and making the viewer aware of the operations of cinematic time, Stevens' adopts and adapts the intellectual perspectives of video artists like Douglas Gordon and Stan Douglas. These are the art materials that he mines to develop key aspects of his own oeuvre: an acute sensitivity to the nature and effect of aesthetic images, an ability to reify dramatic cinematic moments, and a clinical use of repetition to explore and deconstruct clichés of Hollywood machismo and other conventions.

Film theorist Christian Metz once said that the more you repeat, the more you lose meaning, but that eventually a transformation of meaning does occur. Stevens is an expert at manipulating this moment of cognitive renovation - after the familiar meaning has been drained away up until the moment when new meanings begin to fill the vacuum. The recurring cycles of Stevens' loops deconstruct cinema's linear narrative and Hollywood's dependence on this to create meaning. Yet, he also revitalises these codes because he makes us realise that we are watching a standardised mode with a certain vocabulary, and that it might be in our interests to reflect upon what we might do with these idioms. If a segment from a Hollywood film becomes the first stage in the production of a personal or local expression, rather than an end point in a globally determined consumption cycle, then we may gain some sense of control over our own creative potential. Finally, Stevens' use of editing to push the narrative and behavioural conventions of Hollywood product towards a point of implosion, is manifestly anti-spectacle, for behind the glittering surfaces of the magically induced entertainment spectacle lie the technological means of its manufacture. Thus, through the use of this one device – editing – Stevens is able to question an entire apparatus, and in doing so, uncovers something new, interesting and vital.

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